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SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE FORMATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION

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Abstract

The rise of social media is changing how evaluative judgments about organizations are produced, disseminated, and accessed in the public domain. In this article, we discuss how these changes question traditional assumptions that research on media reputation rests upon, and offer an alternative framework that begins to account for how the more active role of organizational audiences, the changing ways in which they express their evaluations, and the increasing plurality and dynamism that characterizes media reputation influence the formation of organizational reputations.

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In April 2017, three security guards dragged a random passenger against his will through the corridor of an overbooked United aircraft and threw him off the airplane. Two passengers filmed the short incident with their mobile phones and instantly uploaded the videos to the social media platform YouTube, from where the vivid videos spread through social media networks, such as Facebook and Twitter. Soon, thousands of social media users publicly criticised United with harsh and angry online-comments, added their own experiences with United's poor customer service, and mocked the airline with sarcastic slogans ("Our prices cannot be beaten – our customers can"). Eventually, major news outlets, such as *The New York Times*, *CNN*, and *The Guardian*, picked up the story, and amplified its reach further. As a consequence, the organization lost 800 million dollars in market value within a day and was eventually forced to introduce costly policies in order to avoid further reputational loss and decrease in bookings (Lazo, 2017).

The United case exemplifies well how social media – new information and communication technologies that enable their users to connect and publicly exchange experiences, opinions, and views on the Internet (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017) – are changing how evaluations of quality, competence or character of organizations are produced and disseminated in the public domain. These changes, we argue, have important consequences for the formation of organizational reputation – understood as the prominence of an organization in the public's mind and collective perceptions about its "quality and performance characteristics" as well as "goals, preferences, and organizational values" (Mishina, Block, & Manor, 2012: 459-460; see also Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005; Love & Kraatz, 2009;).

One of the core tenets of this research area is that publicly available evaluations disseminated by the media influence collective reputational judgments by shaping the informational content about organizations that the public is exposed to (Carroll & McCombs,

2003). While, at such level of abstraction, this idea still applies to the mutating media landscape, the more specific assumptions about how media do so appear less and less suited to direct the examination of a changing phenomenon.

Current assumptions about how the media shape the reputation of organizations (e.g., Deephouse, 2000; Rindova & Fombrun, 1999) are largely based on an understanding of the media landscape before the rise of social media, when public awareness of an incident such as the United case heavily relied on a journalist, who somehow got to know about this incident and found a way to collect sufficient information about it. The incident would eventually become public if the journalist decided that it was news worthy, and if the editor-in-chief concluded that a publication would not cause retaliation that could harm the news organization (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011). The article would describe the incident in a relatively neutral language and give the organization the opportunity to express its view (Zavyalova et al., 2016; Chen & Meindl, 1991). The story would have been broadcasted to an audience that had little possibility to add their own experiences or mobilize others against the organization without major organizing efforts and the support of the media (King, 2008).

The rise of social media, we argue, problematizes these theoretical assumptions because, while they may still apply to a part of the media landscape, they seem less able to account for the substantive changes that social media have introduced in the production and dissemination of publicly available evaluations. As the United incident illustrates, social media now give voice to actors that previously had limited access to the public domain, and enable them to bypass the gatekeeping function of traditional news media and to reach wide audiences connected through online social networks (Castells, 2011; Papacharissi, 2009). Emotionally charged and possibly biased content may now rapidly diffuse (Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012) and become part of online threads and hypertextual webs, as other users comment on, alter or add to the original content as they forward it (Barros, 2014; Albu &

Etter, 2016). These interactions potentially expose audiences to complex and evolving communication exchanges, reflecting a multiplicity of views, experiences, and opinions (Castello, Morsing & Schultz, 2013). At the same time, feeding algorithms and selection of preferential sources increasingly work in the opposite direction to expose users only to circumscribed exchanges, reinforcing partial views (Sunstein, 2009; Pariser, 2011).

In this paper, we discuss how social media – and the new forms of social interaction that they enable – challenge consolidated assumptions about media reputation, and we offer an alternative framework that begins to account for the ways social media influence the formation of reputational judgments.

CURRENT THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MEDIA REPUTATION

Scholars explain the formation of reputation as based on the processing and interpretation of information cues (Sjovall & Talk, 2004; Bitektine, 2011) to form analytical evaluative judgment about, for instance, the quality or the trustworthiness of an organization (Highhouse, Brooks & Gregarus, 2011; Mishina et al., 2012). Organizations disseminate some of these cues themselves, as they strategically project positive images of themselves through corporate communication (Rindova & Fombrun, 1999; Petkova, Rindova, & Gupta, 2013). Other cues are produced by other actors, such as the news media (Pollock & Rindova, 2003), who scrutinize organizational actions and disseminate evaluations that influence the perceptions of stakeholders (Rindova, 1997).

News media are believed to play a central role in the formation of organizational reputation because they “control both the technology that disseminates information about firms to large audiences and the content of the information disseminated” (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006: 56). News media direct public attention to the organizations they cover, and influence stakeholders’ evaluations by selectively presenting and framing information

about them (Carroll & McCombs, 2003). Accordingly, scholars have introduced the term “media reputation” to refer to the “overall evaluation of a firm in the media” (Deephouse, 2000: 1091), and they have widely investigated how media reputation contributes to the formation of collective reputational judgments.

Research on media reputation generally focuses on the coverage of a few identifiable news outlets, selected based on “authority” and “circulation” (e.g., Deephouse, 2000; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, & Reger, 2012), under the assumption that the evaluations they offer adequately capture the informational content made available to the public to form judgments. The assumption of a “close alignment between news media content and public opinion” (Deephouse & Carter, 2005: 339) is so widely accepted, that sometimes the coverage by prominent news media is used as a proxy for measuring collective judgments (e.g., Rindova, Petkova, & Kotha, 2007; King, 2008; Zavyalova, et al., 2012).

Such an approach has the undeniable benefit of simplicity. It is also justified by a set of assumptions about the news media and how they influence collective judgments (see Figure 1) that were not unreasonable in a pre-social media era, when it was not an excessive oversimplification, for instance, to assume that relatively few, authoritative sources broadcasted largely homogenous content to relatively passive audiences. In this section, we briefly outline these assumptions. In the following section, we discuss how the rise of social media is challenging them, and offer an alternative framework to examine the formation of reputation in settings where these new technologies heavily shape how actors disseminate and access evaluations about organizations¹.

Insert Figure 1 here

¹ To some extent, current assumptions about the production and dissemination of evaluations by the news media do represent an oversimplification, even without considering the rise of social media. The new information and communication technologies, however, have introduced changes in how information is made publicly available and by whom that make this oversimplification increasingly problematic.

Top-Down Communication: The Gatekeeping Role and Influence of News Media

Current theories of media reputation generally conceptualize the dissemination of media evaluations as a top-down process, through a broadcasting mode of diffusion (one-to-many), whereby relatively few media outlets spread evaluations about organizations among a broad audience (e.g., Deephouse, 2000; Rindova et al., 2005). This assumption is consistent with the idea that news media enjoy exclusive formal and informal access to elite sources (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011) and act as gatekeepers (White, 1950; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) by filtering information they consider newsworthy and disseminating it to the general public (Brosius & Weimann, 1996; Katz, 1957). In this respect, extant literature assumes a structural distinction between a privileged source of evaluations (the news media) and an audience who receives and processes them (the public).

Reputation scholars assume that individuals look to the evaluative content of news media to form their judgments, because they perceive journalists as “authoritative sources” (Rindova et al., 2006: 33) and attribute them “superiority in evaluating firms” (Rindova et al., 2005: 1034). Scholars also attribute “wide-ranging influence” (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011: 1080) to news media because established and capillary distribution channels confers them a “structural position” (Rindova et al., 2005: 1034) that enables them to reach audiences “at large scale” (Rindova et al., 2006: 33; see also Deephouse, 2000).

Relative Homogeneity of Sources, Content, and Style of News Media Evaluations

Reputation scholars have long argued that news organizations “reinforce uniformity and consistency” of publicly available evaluations of organization (Chen & Meindl, 1991: 527). This assumption justifies the treatment of media reputation as a rather monolithic entity with strong and direct influence on collective judgments: if we assume that news media not only

enjoy a near monopoly in the diffusion of information, but also tend to disseminate converging evaluations, then we can also safely assume that these evaluations strongly shape collective judgments, as no alternative accounts are available in the public domain.

Again, this assumption is not unreasonable if we consider the isomorphic pressures, professional routines, and informal and formal control mechanisms that characterize the field of news production (Schudson, 2001; Deuze, 2005), and lead to the fairly uniform content and style of the evaluation disseminated by the news media (Chen & Meindl, 1991). Socialization in the news room, training and apprenticeship, professional codes of conduct, and peer control contribute to reinforce journalistic norms, practices, and routines (Tuchman, 1978, 2002; Cotter, 2010) and induce journalists to follow similar heuristics to decide what is “newsworthy” (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

In fact, journalists not only tend to have similar selection criteria, but also to have access to and use a similar set of sources for their stories (Schudson, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). By reducing the time available to report, research, write, and reflect on stories (Klinenberg, 2005), cost-cutting measures in newsrooms over the last decades have fostered a higher reliance on news agencies (Manning, 2001) and a broader use of pre-packaged public relation material (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Zavyalova et al., 2012). As a result, news media rarely produce original content, but rather offer representations that largely draw upon – or “refract” (Rindova, 1997) – images projected by the organizations themselves.

Finally, institutionalized professional practices and perceived expectations of peers and editors-in-chief (Reese & Ballinger, 2001; Tuchman, 2001) lead journalists to write in an often impersonal and unemotional style, using a vocabulary and tone that reflect a “journalistic genre” (Cotter, 2010; Deuze, 2005). Even though digitalization has led news organizations to experiment with innovative styles and formats (Boczkowski, 2005), control

of supervisors, guidelines, routines, and short deadlines tend to undermine creativity in the production of news media narratives (Mortensen & Svendsen, 1980).

It could be objected that this assumption of homogeneity offered an oversimplified portrayal of news production and its outcomes (Benson, 2006). However, research did show that news media tend to follow similar topics (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Golan, 2006) and that news content tends to converge over time through cross-referencing and confirmation from similar others (Pollock & Rindova, 2003). It also showed that while some news workers, such as partisan-journalists, pursue opinionated, political agendas (Schudson, 2001), Western journalists generally strove to fulfil their professional role of objective and impartial observers (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). These studies, then, offered some support to the assumptions that justified the treatment of news media (and the evaluations they offered) as a relatively monolithic entity.

The Influence of Organizations over the Media

Finally, reputation scholars not only assume that news media exert considerable influence on collective judgments, but also that they are themselves strongly influenced directly or indirectly by the organizations they cover (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011; Zayvalova et al., 2012), and that the content they disseminate draws primarily on corporate communication and does not deviate much from it (Chen & Meindl, 1991). This assumption is supported by research suggesting that news media may be reluctant to disseminate negative evaluation of organization for fear of losing preferential access to information, concerns of legal actions, and their economic dependence (McManus, 1995; Westphal & Deephouse, 2011).

News media need access to corporate information to feed their articles (Reich, 2009; Schudson, 1996; Sigal, 1986). Because journalists face knowledge asymmetries vis-à-vis organizations and have significant constraints on the time they can devote to any one story

(Tuchman, 2002), they regard senior managers' communications as particularly useful, and may refrain from publishing content that may endanger privileged relationships with them (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011; Shani & Westphal, 2016).

Publishers and editors-in-chiefs may also be reluctant to publicise content that may trigger legal action (Picard, 2004) or cause the loss of advertising revenues (Rinallo & Basuroy, 2009) and undermine the economic viability of the organization (Epstein, 1973). While news media occasionally produce content that may cast an organization in a negative light, they tend to do so when events are already in the public domain – such as in the case of disasters or criminal investigations – and usually offer organizational spokespersons an opportunity to comment on the event.

THE FORMATION OF REPUTATION IN THE NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Based on the assumptions we have outlined in the previous section, it was not unreasonable for past research to conceptualize the influence of media reputation on collective judgments as a unidirectional process, where the evaluations made available to individuals by the news media largely converged, rarely questioned images projected by organizations, and heavily shaped the collective perceptions of audiences, who generally assumed the neutrality, facticity and credibility of the representations that they were offered (see Figure 1). In fact, many of these assumptions were supported by empirical evidence.

In this section, however, we argue that the rise of social media, and digital media technologies more generally, is challenging the capacity of these assumptions to fully account for how evaluations of organizations are now made public, disseminated, and received in the changing media landscape (see Table 1).

Insert table 1 here

As we do so, we offer an alternative explanatory framework (portrayed in Figure 2) that draws attention to the technological features (indicated in the figure with an asterisk) and social dynamics that characterize the dissemination of evaluations in the mutated media landscape, and encourages us to revisit and re-discuss assumptions about how media reputation influences organizational reputation.

Insert Figure 2 here

From Vertical Broadcasting to Horizontal Information Flows and Co-Production

Social media offer alternative channels to disseminate evaluations about organizations in the public domain, to the vertical, top-down, one-to-many diffusion that characterized news media in a pre-social media era. Blogs and discussion forums enable users to draw public attention to organizational actions and to comment on them (Brodie et al., 2013). Virtual social networks allow users to exchange information, views, and experiences with thousands of direct and indirect contacts (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). Review sites enable individual assessments of products, services, and jobs, to reach and possibly influence the perceptions of thousands of visitors of potential customers and employees (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014). Collectively, posts, tweets, reviews, etc. contribute to a process through which millions of individuals are exposed to evaluations produced by their peers and other actors.

Status and structural position vs. sharing. A first important implication of this change is that individual evaluations may now reach large-scale attention regardless of the status and structural position of the sender. Past studies of media reputation assumed that the impact of evaluations disseminated by news media depended on the relative authoritativeness of the sender and was proportional to its reach (e.g., Deephouse, 2000; Rindova et al., 2005). To some extent, this is still the case in the mutated landscape. While some social media users do enjoy structural positions analogous to the most prominent news media because of the

enormous amount of “followers” who routinely receive information from them (Gillin, 2009; Macquarrie et al., 2013), a large majority of the content disseminated by other users directly reaches only a few proximal peers (Dellarocas, 2003).

Social media, however, now enable users to play a more active part in the diffusion of evaluations by directly forwarding evaluative content they have produced, encountered or received to the attention of other users through posting, tweeting, forwarding, etc., activities that are subsumed under the term *sharing* (Belk, 2009). Even before social media, audiences drew one another’s attention to pieces of news, shared them, commented on them, etc. These responses, however, remained localized – therefore, for the most part, negligible. In the new media landscape, instead, as the United incident indicates, these responses are what allows content produced by users without status and structural position comparable to traditional news media to gain large-scale attention (Papacharissi, 2009; Castells, 2011), with important implications – as we discuss later – on the content made available in the public domain.

Co-production and networked narratives. A second important implication is that social media now enable vast audiences to serve as both senders and receivers of evaluations, and collectively engage in the *co-production* of these evaluations.

Past studies assumed media to broadcast information vertically, with limited opportunities for audiences to respond. Consistent with this idea, past research had little concern for how audiences would react to, question, or discuss the content they were exposed to (Rindova & Martins, 2012), because their reaction had limited opportunities to reach a wide audience. In contrast, social media enable information to also flow horizontally through large-scale networks of interconnected social relations (Castells, 2011; Boyd & Ellison, 2008), where every point in a network can contribute to the creation and rapid diffusion of content, as users freely and easily share information across and between different platforms (Jenkins, 2006). Even news media now frequently offer readers the opportunity to voice their immediate

reactions to their content, interact, and share their views with one another (Domingo et al., 2008; Ziegele, Breiner, & Quiring, 2014). By doing so, they effectively involve them in the co-production of publicly available evaluations, as other readers are simultaneously exposed to the original evaluations and the responses of the audience.

This change is important, theoretically, because it means that assuming a structural distinction between senders (the media) and receivers (the audience) of evaluations offers an increasingly unrealistic portrayal of how information is disseminated in the media landscape, where stakeholders can no longer be assumed to be mere receivers of information. Social media, in this respect, have made the distinction between sender and receiver situational, rather than structural, as in a given communicative exchange any member of the audience is also a potential sender of content, and vice versa (Castells, 2011).

On social media, therefore, information about organizations often comes in the form of “networked narratives” (Kozinets et al., 2010) – threads of posts, discussion forums, etc., where users comment, add, link, and/or “mash up” the content of existing narratives (Jackson, 2009: 730), thereby challenging, reinforcing, or elaborating original evaluations (Kozinets et al, 2010; Libai et al., 2010). The content of these narratives, therefore, becomes “re-sequenced, altered, customized or re-narrated” (Cover, 2006: 141) as it propagates, blurring the distinction between author and audience, as multiple actors engage in its co-production.

New digital technologies facilitate the process of co-production through hypertextual links that enable direct access to other content available online (Barros, 2014; Albu & Etter, 2016). In contrast to the linear engagement of audiences with news media articles before the advent of the Internet, the engagement with hypertexts occurs within a nonlinear space of interrelated textual nodes (Manovich, 2001) that also includes access to archives of news media outlets and hyperlinks in or to online news media articles. As links are constantly made

and modified, these networks are open to an unlimited number of addition from multiple sources, and their content and configuration can evolve in unpredictable ways (Landow, 1997).

For instance, in January 2012, when McDonalds launched a Twitter campaign with the hashtag #McDStories to generate supportive accounts from its customers, thousands of users from different parts of the world expressed publicly their memorable negative experiences about the fast-food chain. The content of tweets ranged from criticizing the taste of the products, to chemical ingredients in food production, unacceptable hygiene-standards in restaurants, and accusations of causing obesity. Electronic links to blogs, websites, photos, videos and other social media sites vividly enriched this evolving networked narrative, which eventually found its way into traditional newspapers and magazines (Hill, 2012), and is still accessible years after the initial event.

From Homogeneity to Heterogeneity of Publicly Available Evaluations

Earlier in this paper, we discussed how scholars have generally treated media reputation as a relatively monolithic entity. In contrast, as the McDonald's incident exemplifies, Social media have opened up alternative channels for the horizontal dissemination of information that enable audience members to openly question the content of news media and corporate communications, and to offer alternative evaluations (Albu & Etter, 2016).

Over one billion actors now use various platforms, such as virtual social networks (e.g., Facebook), blogs (e.g., Wordpress), micro blogs (e.g., Twitter), video- (e.g., Youtube), photo- (e.g., Instagram), rating-platforms (e.g., Tripadvisor), forums (e.g., Redit), and comment functions of news media (e.g., New York Times) to discuss and evaluate organizations, their actions, products, and services. These platforms enable a broad range of actors – including

consumers, politicians, celebrities, citizens, activists, indie- and alternative media, and NGOs – to directly access the public domain (Castells, 2011).

Because of the varied sources of information that they draw on, motives that drive them, and constraints that they experience, these users may offer quite diverse evaluations of organizations and their actions. Combined with the diminishing influence of organizations over the production and dissemination of information – no longer centralized in few outlets partly dependent on organizations for their revenues and access to information – this diversity is increasing the likelihood that audiences are exposed to evaluations that diverge from official corporate communication (MacKay & Munro, 2012) and news media reports (Etter & Vestergaard, 2015).

Heterogeneity of sources of information. Social media make a plurality of experiences, opinions, and topics visible and potentially heard (Castello et al., 2013), because the broad range of conversations that they host are not necessarily shaped by commercial news criteria and pre-packaged information received by the organizations themselves.

Much of the content shared by a multitude of social media users, for instance, draws on personal experiences – such as shock at a cell phone catching fire, or appalment at a fellow passenger being forcefully removed from his seat before take-off – which may not otherwise reach the attention of the public (or not in such a vivid manner). Social media have been described as an enormous electronic “word-of-mouth” (Mangold & Faulds, 2008: 358), that enable individual users to publicly share their experiences by posting comments on review sites (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014), reporting them on their blogs, disseminating them through social networks (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015), or even creating groups in support or in opposition to organizations (Coombs & Halloday, 2012). Before social media, these responses would have largely been confined to a few personal relations; social media now enable them to reach the public domain, where they may become highly influential.

Indeed, social media users tend to perceive other users who disseminate content associated with personal experiences as a reliable source of information about organizations and their products (Banning & Sweeters, 2007; Mangold & Faulds, 2009) because of their “experiential credibility” (Hussain et al. 2016) – that is their first-hand experience with a topic or situation (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013). While bloggers and other celebrities’ support for organizations may be questioned as insincere, ordinary users are perceived as more trustworthy because independent from “corporate interests” (Johnson & Kaye, 2004: 625).

The perceived trustworthiness of content disseminated through social networks is also enhanced by the particular relationship between the sender and the receiver, as homophily – the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with individuals who are similar to themselves (Pariser, 2011) – may increase the credibility of evaluations received from proximal ties perceived as members of the same social group (Tajfel, 2010) or sharing similar interests, opinions, and socio-economic backgrounds (Boyd & Ellison, 2008), or from other sources a user identifies with.

Heterogeneity of motives. A second source of heterogeneity in publicly available evaluations of organizations is the broader range of motives that drive their production and dissemination on social media, besides conventional assessments of newsworthiness. Social media are not only used to report positive or negative experiences of organizational products or services; they are also used to express and enact individual, social and organizational identities, by highlighting and/or commenting on organizational events and actions that resonate with or violate personal values and beliefs (Papacharissi, 2012; Shao, 2009).

Individual users of social media are frequently driven by a need for social validation and relationship development, which are satisfied through acts of self-expression (Hollenbaugh, 2010; Papacharissi, 2012). For these users, content production depends on their “ego

involvement” in a topic (Park, Oh, & Kang, 2012), understood as “the extent to which individuals’ self-concept, or identity, is connected with their position on a particular issue and forms an integral part of how individuals define themselves (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005: 136).” Social media enable these users to stage an “online performance” (Papacharissi, 2012) through which they attempt to express, construct, and enact personal or social identities (Zhao et al., 2008), and manage bonds among members of social groups (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman-Healy, 2000)². Users do so through the choice of what they talk about (or do not talk about), how they talk about it, and the positions they take (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Kim, 2014).

Similarly, NGOs and activists, use social media to build or reinforce a distinctive image – frequently built in opposition to corporate practices (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012) – by supporting or stigmatizing actions that are congruent or incongruent with the social values they advocate. Engagement with social media helps these actors to fulfil their mission, by drawing other users’ attention to societal issues and often mobilizing them against organizations (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). The evaluations they diffuse, therefore, are often critical of the conventional representation of organizations in the news media, and question the images strategically projected by the organizations they target (Etter & Vestergaard, 2015).

Heterogeneity of constraints. The heterogeneity of evaluations of organizations made available on social media is further increased by the fact that most users are neither restricted by professional norms that recommends fact-checking and the verification of sources, nor afraid of losing privileged access to information or being legally held responsible for diffusing and sharing inaccurate information. In fact, even while lawsuits against social

² In fact, consumer research shows that sharing one’s experiences and evaluations through word of mouth is also associated with the motivation to establish one’s status and identity as an expert (Arndt, 1967).

media users are possible, they are not always advisable as they tend to provoke heated reactions from other social media users, and eventually cause additional reputational damage (Coombs & Halloday, 2012).

Free from these constraints, users frequently disseminate content lacking substantial factual basis (Veil et al., 2012), as long as it is instrumental to the expression of a desired personal or social identity, or the strengthening of social bonds³. Similarly, activists and NGOs, may offer one-sided representations of organizations and events in order to achieve their goals and mobilize other audiences against their targets (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

Many actors in social media also enjoy fewer restrictions than journalists do regarding the format and style in which they are allowed to express their evaluations. Breaking conventional formats and experimenting in flexible multimodal combination of text, images, audio, and video (Jenkins, 2006; Jackson, 2009) is seen as instrumental to promote users' creative self (Papacharissi, 2012), and it is encouraged by the observation that original, creative content is more likely to be attended to, liked, and forwarded on social media (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

The discovery of horsemeat in Findus processed beef products in April 2013, for instance, triggered a flood of highly emotional, often humorous posts and messages in social media depicting the organization and their meat products as contaminated with horse-meat in pictures, logos, and texts regardless of copyrights and detailed accurate evidence ("Findus lasagne - with real Trojan beef"; "Let's hide here, they won't Findus"). This content spread rapidly in digital networks and exposed the food safety issue of an organization and the industry to hundreds of thousands of social media users and eventually urged the organization

³ For example, over the last decade, social media users repeatedly voiced their discontent with racist comments (wrongly) attributed to fashion brand CEO Tommy Hilfiger; they set aside checks of factual accuracy, to satisfy their need to express their identity through public outcry contributing to the viral propagation of the incorrect information of this hoax (Joeseeph, 2016).

for a costly rebranding three years later, as its reputation had not recovered since (Hartley-Parkinson, 2016).

Humour, cultural jamming and the subversion of organizational images. As the Findus incident illustrates, content diffused on social media often uses humour to express evaluations of organizations and/or their products (Kumar & Combe, 2015). Humour is believed to fulfil a social need to connect by helping convey emotions and knowledge, and sealing bonds between people (Martin, 2010). On social media, users may use humour to increase their visibility and popularity within an online community (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1996). In fact, the creative use of humour has been shown to provoke emotional responses that stimulate seeking, discussing, and sharing information (Martin, 2010), motivate individuals to pass along this content online (Guadagno et al., 2013 Nelson-Field, Riebe, & Newstead, 2013), and spur its diffusion on social networks (Dobele et al., 2007).

On social media, humorous remarks often take the form of cultural jamming (Carducci, 2006; Guadagno et al., 2013) – manifested in the creative alteration of corporate material (logos, slogans, ads, etc.) to express criticism of corporate policies or decisions, by highlighting contradictions between the images they project and the reality of their actions. In the aftermath of the Deep Water Horizon oil spill, for instance, social media were flooded with retouched versions of the logo of oil company BP, where the yellow-green sun was now tainted with black oil, dying sea birds, etc. Several years after the scandal, searching “BP logo” on Google still produces these jammed images, as a perpetual denunciation of insincerity and irresponsibility.

Cultural jamming exemplifies the subversion of images that social media enable and reward – as opposed to the refraction process (Rindova, 1997) central to current conceptualizations of media reputation. This is not to say that humour as a form of expression or critique is not available to news media. Some journalists make of humour a trademark of

personal columns, and news media may occasionally engage in cultural jamming, although this material is usually relegated to satirical cartoons. In fact, these cartoons often find wide diffusion also in social media (Leskovec, Backstrom, & Kleinberg, 2009).

In this section, we have argued that, in the new media landscape – because of the increasing heterogeneity of sources of information, motives, and constraints – neutral and factual evaluations will co-exist with less balanced, factually incorrect, deliberately mobilizing evaluations, often expressed through unconventional styles and humour. While past research assumed that the facticity and neutrality of the content were important for evaluations offered by the news media to influence collective judgments (King & Soule, 2007), lack of balance or accuracy does not seem to prevent diffusion on social media. On the contrary, unbalanced and inaccurate accounts may receive more attention, rather than less, and diffuse to vast audiences (Kwon et al., 2013), when they are expressed creatively or humorously (Blommaert & Varis, 2017), or – as we discuss next – they stir strong emotions (Guadagno et al., 2013) or resonate with pre-existing views (Sunstein, 2009).

From Informational to Emotional Content

Current research on media reputation tends to focus on the informational content of media coverage, under the assumption that “media reputation reflects more deliberate and analytical judgments” about an organization’s quality, competence, trustworthiness, etc. (Zavyalova et al., 2016: 7), and scholars tend to regard affect as irrelevant for reputational judgment formation (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015). This assumption is consistent with the idea that professional identity, norms, and routines induce journalists to offer factual and balanced accounts of events (e.g., Deephouse, 2000). In fact, scholars assume that it is exactly because audiences believe news media to “accurately cover hard news and facts” (King & Soule, 2007: 424) that media reputation influences collective judgments. Even though scholars

recognize that at times news media dramatize events (Gamson, 1994), they tend to relegate emotional responses to dramatized coverage of organizational actions to the domain of celebrity (e.g., Rindova et al., 2006).

An important implication of the heterogeneity that we have described in the previous section, however, is the increasing emotional charge of evaluations about the quality or character of organizations available in the public domain. The expression of evaluations and their subsequent diffusion in social media is often triggered by strong emotions, such as anger and frustration (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016), surprise and excitement (Berger & Milkman, 2012), shock and disgust (Veil et al., 2012), or joy (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). These emotions motivate users to share their experiences with an organization's products or services (Wang et al., 2010), or to publicly voice their views about organizational actions that uphold or contradict their values (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016). They often transpire in the content of evaluations – vividly conveyed not only in words, but also graphic signs (Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2007), images and videos – complementing the informational content they carry (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015).

This emotional content has important implications for their impact on collective judgments. First, emotionally charged content is preferentially processed (attended to or avoided, and remembered) in comparison to content that is not affectively charged (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999; Lang, 2006; Lang, Dhillon, & Dong, 1995), eventually leading to selective attention and accessibility of information (Nabi, 2007). Affectively charged content also influences reasoning, logical inferences, and the use of heuristics (Blanchette & Richards, 2000), and induces further information seeking, more systematic processing of information, eventually shaping positive or negative cognitive responses towards organizational actions (Nabi, 2002, 2003). Even if factually inaccurate or incomplete, then, evaluations that appeal

to emotions can prove more persuasive and influential on people's attitudes and judgments, than analytical evaluations that appeal to reasons (Nabi, 2007).

Second, the emotional content of evaluations increases the likelihood that they are shared and disseminated further (Berger & Milkman, 2012). In part, this phenomenon can be explained by the selective attention and processing discussed above. In part, content that evokes strong emotions, such as amusement, happiness, anger, fear, disgust, or surprise, is shared more often than less arousing content – both online and offline (Heath, Bell, & Sternberg, 2001; Dobeles et al., 2007; Rime, 2009), because emotional arousal mobilizes an excitatory state (Heilman, 1997) that pushes individuals to share news or information with others (Berger, 2011).

On the receiver's side, instead, emotional content may propagate rapidly through social networks through "emotional contagion" – a term that refers to the convergence of one's emotional state with the emotional states of those whom one is observing or interacting with (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). This phenomenon manifests when emotionally charged information is shared by an original sender – such as the eyewitnesses of the United incident – with his or her links, and from these receivers to their own links (Guadagno et al., 2013), rapidly branching out in multiple directions and indirectly reaching – and possibly mobilizing – a vast audience (Karpf, 2010).

Selective Exposure and Audience Fragmentation

Finally, social media are changing the way media reputations shape collective judgments by facilitating the more or less conscious selective exposure of users to sources of evaluations.

Research on media reputation tends to conceptualize receivers of evaluations as relatively undifferentiated entities, either as part of homogenous stakeholder groups or the more general public. Hence, current theories do not consider the possibility of intra-audience differences,

as they assume – more or less implicitly – that members of a “stakeholder group (e.g., consumers of a particular organization) notice similar types of cues, react in a similar manner toward those cues, and hence arrive at a similar conclusion” (Mishina et al. 2012: 460).

While past research would not deny that audience members can select preferential sources of information (for instance, by purchasing a certain newspaper or watching certain TV news), other assumptions about the media system we discussed earlier – relatively few outlets available (Zavyalova et al., 2012), relative homogeneity of content (Deephouse, 2000), influence of organizations over news media (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011), etc. – make these choices of little consequence over the evaluations one is exposed to.

Communication scholars, however, observe that social media and internet technologies more generally are “increasingly giving users the ability to ‘filter’ information and interactions and so ‘self-select’ what they wish to be exposed to” (Dahlberg, 2008: 829).

Selective exposure and frame resonance. Confronted with a staggering increase in potential sources of information and heterogeneity of content, audiences tend to pre-select a number of sources that they automatically receive information from in the form of tweets, news, etc. (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Sunstein, 2009), and use bookmarks to routinely return to preferred sites, or customize the news they receive (Dahlberg, 2008). In light of the increasing heterogeneity of sources and content, these choices may be highly consequential for the evaluations they are exposed to (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012), hence for the formation of their reputational judgments.

Individuals naturally tend to seek out information that confirms prior beliefs and to ignore disconfirming one (Wason, 1960; Nickerson, 1989). When confronted with events open to multiple interpretations, individuals tend to select the one that allows them to preserve a “consistent, positive self-conception” (Weick, 1995: 23). Because of these reasons users may rather selectively expose themselves to sources and evaluations that are likely to “resonate”

with their views and help them preserve the integrity of their self concept (Sunstein, 2009; Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). They may disregard concerns with accuracy and facticity, as long as the content they receive may be used – as discussed earlier – to express personal identities or strengthen social bonds (Papacharissi, 2012).

Selective exposure, in this respect, intensifies the influence on collective judgments of a phenomenon known as “frame resonance”, which refers to the degree to which the content of communication is perceived as “believable and compelling” among a particular audience because it is aligned with the particular beliefs – “frames” – that they use to interpret information (Snow et al., 1986: 477). Frame resonance, then, explains why certain content is more or less likely to be accepted by an audience and influence collective judgements (Snow & Benford, 1988). Selective exposure intensifies this effect to the extent that various technological features enable users to maximize exposure to frame resonant content, and conversely minimize exposure to content that may challenge current frames (e.g., one’s views or sense of self).

Fragment audiences and echo chambers. Recent developments in the media landscape are intensifying selective exposure and its influence on the formation of reputational judgments. On the one hand, the development of feeding algorithms is strengthening selective exposure by automatically channelling information to users based on their preferences, past choices and/or social connections (Pariser, 2011). As these algorithms often operate automatically, users may be unaware that the information they receive has been pre-selected for them, paradoxically giving them the illusion of control, while really being exposed only to a partial and preferential representation of reality. On the other hand, indie-media, alternative media, as well as traditional news media are increasingly customizing their content to compete for the attention of niche audiences (Bernhardt et al., 2008; Virag, 2008). By doing so, they offer their audience increasingly narrow, partial, and pre-selected information.

The combined effect of these two trends is the increasing exposure of audiences to “preferred” evaluations, and their diminishing exposure to content that may challenge their views. The decreasing overlap in the information and representations of reality that different users are exposed to is potentially leading to the increasing fragmentation of audiences (Stroud, 2010; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). An extreme manifestation of this fragmentation are so-called echo chambers (Sunstein, 2009): online spaces – such as fan-forums or online activists communities – that host exchanges among like-minded individuals, sheltered from opposing views (Sunstein, 2009; Dahlberg 2008). Echo-chambers are the result of the tendency of individuals to create homogeneous groups and to affiliate with individuals that share their views (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Stroud, 2010). In these online spaces, selective attention to frame resonant information may reinforce commonly held views (Pariser, 2011), and people may experience discomfort at expressing views that diverge from what appears to be the dominant opinion (Clemente & Roulet, 2015). As a result of these dynamics, partial and possibly inaccurate information may “echo” within the group, leading members to overstate the public prominence of an issue or the extent to which their evaluations are shared by a broader public (Sunstein, 2009)⁴.

An important consequence of the dynamics we described in this section is that they may eventually result in the formation of separate venues for the co-production of networked narratives, as audience members gradually join online groups and interactions that resonate with their views – and abandon those that do not. These dynamics will eventually result in the co-existence in the public domain of multiple, diverging media reputations. For example, while the hashtag #mcdstories originally attracted evaluations by both supporters and critics

⁴ In the political sphere, these dynamics have led to the rising phenomenon of so-called “fake news” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) – factually incorrect or entirely unsubstantiated reports, presented as solid news and diffused as such. The popularity and lingering influence of fake news shows how factual inaccuracy does not necessarily impede the propagation of information to the extent that it resonates with the views of a particular audience, who receives information only from preferential sources.

of the fast-food chain, over time, negative sentiments took over. Supporters gradually left the interactive arena and began to express their views instead in other separated forums, such as the official Facebook page of McDonalds (Albu & Etter, 2016).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Extant research on media reputation is based on assumptions developed when most publicly available evaluations of organizations were produced and disseminated by traditional news media (or the organizations themselves). In this paper, we have argued that the increasing use of social media to produce, disseminate and receive information is modifying the media landscape – including the way news media operate – in ways that make these assumptions no longer accurate and/or productive.

By saying so, we do not mean to question the validity of findings of research conducted before the rise of social media, nor the general idea that the media influence the formation of collective reputational judgments. We propose, however, that new technologies supporting the production and dissemination of information in the public domain – as well as the social dynamics that unfold around them – are changing how publicly available evaluations influence collective reputational judgments. These changes (summarized in Figure 2) question assumptions that current theories and past studies rest upon (summarized in Figure 1) and have important implications for how we conceive, study, and manage organizational and media reputation.

Implications for Theory

The mutating media landscape requires us to think in a new way about how increasingly diverse media evaluations, produced by multiple actors and disseminated through multiple channels, influence the formation of organizational reputation. The alternative framework we

offer (see Figure 2), in this respect, invites to acknowledge the more active and interactive role of organizational audiences, to explore its implications for the increasing plurality and dynamism that characterizes media reputation, and to revisit our understanding of organizational reputation to recognize the affective component of reputational judgments.

From one reputation to multiple reputations. Current theories generally assume that news media offer relatively homogenous evaluative representations of organizations and that, in the absence of alternatives in the public domain, these representations shape collective judgements, so that organizational reputation comes to be closely aligned to media reputation, which, in turn, is based to a large degree on pre-packaged information supplied by organizations.

The changes that social media introduced in how evaluations are made available and disseminated in the public domain, however, question these assumptions and the idea of media reputation as a monolithic entity reflecting relatively homogenous evaluations offered by the news media that they imply. They encourage us instead to refine our understanding of media reputation in ways that explicitly acknowledge the plurality of evaluations potentially co-existing at a given point in time, and support the investigation of sources and implications of pluralism in media reputations.

Current theories do not deny that multiple actors may produce evaluative representations of organizations and/or their products – by publicly talking about them, distributing leaflets, sending personal letters, etc. However, they assume that, because of their status and structural position, news media possess a superior credibility and reach, and are therefore far more influential on the formation of collective judgments than other actors, who, for the most part, need to attract the attention of the news media to gain access to large audiences. As a result, past research has generally overlooked the possible influence of members of organizational audiences on reputation (Rindova & Martins, 2012).

In contrast to this view, the framework we have proposed begins to account for the active role of these audiences in shaping the content of publicly available evaluations, as well as paths and patterns of their diffusions. Our framework draws attention to how social media now enable these audiences to independently exchange and disseminate evaluations in the public domain, and reach vast audiences without relying on the gatekeeping role of news media. By doing so, organizational audiences are now able to publicly challenge evaluations offered by the media, or even subvert images projected by organizations themselves to highlight contradictions between communication and action. These changes suggest that future research should pay more attention to the active and direct engagement of audiences, instead of assuming that they influence reputation exclusively when the news media pay attention to their actions (e.g. King, 2011).

Our framework also highlights how social media have amplified the possibility of organizational audiences to expose themselves to different partial and possibly inaccurate representations, and to selectively propagate these representations to restricted groups that insulate themselves from alternative and opposing views. Current theories of organizational reputation tend to consider the public sphere as a large venue, where news media mediate most efforts to disseminate or dispute evaluations in the public domain. In the new media landscape, instead, the fragmentation of media and audiences and selective exposure to and propagation of heterogeneous information are effectively segmenting the public sphere into multiple “interaction arenas” (Bromberg & Fine, 2002).

Sociological research introduced this notion to refer to disputes over the memory and reputation of individuals, as multiple actors – historians, journalists, and academics – add to, elaborate, or challenge one another’s accounts (Bromberg & Fine, 2002). This term, we argue, may be fruitfully applied to describe how, because the more active role of audiences described above, reputational dynamics now play out in multiple, partly interconnected

venues. Some of these arenas may host ongoing interactions among multiple actors, including organizations themselves (Aula & Mantere, 2013); others may form around events or issues that attract the attention and/or concern of interested stakeholders for a limited amount of time (Whelan et al., 2013). In some of these arenas, like-minded actors (re)produce uncontested, if partial representations of organizations (Albu & Etter, 2016); in others multiple evaluations co-exist in nuanced networked narratives (Barros, 2014; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014).

These observations are theoretically relevant because they problematize the assumption that organizational audiences are relatively homogenous (at least within each stakeholder group), and that their judgements will be closely aligned with media reputation. They point to how by enabling the co-existence of multiple evaluations in the public domain and, at the same time, the selective self-exposure to preferential ones, new technologies simultaneously expand and restrict diversity in the evaluations audiences are potentially exposed to. This recognition invite us to explore how reputational arenas dynamically emerge and evolve, and how audience-specific characteristics and actions trace and retrace boundaries around the influence the influence of media evaluations on collective reputational judgments.

In fact, an important implication of the ideas that frame resonance influences the diffusion of evaluations and that selective exposure tends to create echo chambers that reinforce previously held evaluations, is the recognition that, just as media reputation has the potential to shape individual judgments, so their judgments may shape the media content that audiences are exposed to by selectively filtering the information they attend to and re-direct. These ideas, then, challenge the assumption that media reputation exerts a unidirectional influence on organizational reputation, suggesting instead a more dynamic and recursive relationship between these two constructs than currently assumed.

From a static to a dynamic view of media reputation. The framework we have developed in this paper is also important, because it suggests that current assumptions and operationalization of media reputation – as the average favourability of media coverage (e.g., Deephouse, 2000; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Zavyalova et al., 2012) – may fail to capture its more fluid and contested nature in the new media landscape. Recognizing that media reputations are continuously produced and re-produced through multiple acts of communication in a network of communicative actors (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011), instead, encourages us to shift attention from correlates of media reputation – as a “thing” – to the effect of communication exchanges and information technologies that shape how public evaluations are produced, disseminated and disputed on an ongoing basis.

Implicit in current research is the relatively inertial nature of media reputation, such that it is methodologically acceptable to produce synthetic scores of reputation that summarize media coverage over relatively long periods of time – usually a year. The co-production process that we have described earlier, however, directly exposes the representations of organizations offered by the news media or other sources to real time contestations, additions, and elaborations from audience members. In this respect, the reputation of an organization can be considered as always potentially in a state of “becoming” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), by being continuously and publicly re-produced by multiple actors through the production and dissemination of evaluative representations.

In a specific interaction arena, then, convergence among these evaluations may only be situational, temporary, and emerging from the interactions of communicative actors, rather than being fixed or objectified. While it is certainly possible that all evaluations produced about an organizations in a period of time temporarily converge, this condition may not last for long, as new evaluations may question the “dominant” evaluations. The relative stability of these evaluations, then, becomes an empirical – rather than definitional – issue, and the

study of whether and how changing media representations really influence collective reputational judgements an interesting avenue for future research. It may as well be, for instance, that so-called social media firestorms (Pfeffer et al., 2014) are just short-term flares, emotional outbursts and public blaming that – in the end – leave collective judgments fundamentally unaltered. As the cases of United and Findus illustrate, however, these flares may be highly consequential, if they do not subside until the organization in question announces drastic actions, and are therefore reputational events worth of additional investigations.

The nature of reputation: Analytical and affective evaluations. Finally, the framework we have offered invites us to reconceptualise reputational judgments to acknowledge explicitly its cognitive and affective components, and to begin to explore the influence of affect and emotions on how individuals relate to organizations.

In the new media landscape, social media users are increasingly exposed to a mix of informational and emotional content regarding the organization and its products. The former prevailing, for instance, in the content disseminated by news media or in analytical assessments in product reviews, the latter found more frequently in narrative content disseminated by individual users or the textual comments that accompany analytical assessments. Affect and emotions, importantly, are not restricted to a few “celebrity organizations” (Rindova et al., 2006), but as the opening vignette illustrates may be triggered by events that are relevant to collective perception of the qualities and character of an organization, that is to its organizational reputation.

This observation is important because it suggests that properly accounting for reputational dynamics in the new media landscape requires us to rebalance current emphasis on information processing with increased attention to the emotional content of evaluations. While some reputation scholars occasionally hinted to the possibility that reputational

judgments may have both a cognitive and an affective component (Fombrun, 1996; Ponzi, Fombrun & Gardberg, 2011), current theories largely understand the formation of organizational reputations – that is the construction and revision of evaluative judgments – mainly in cognitive, analytical terms (e.g., Highhouse et al., 2009; Mishina et al., 2012; Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015).

Changes in the media landscape, however, encourage us to reconsider this position and incorporate more explicitly affect in our understanding of reputation, because they highlight the mediating role of emotional responses on the influence of media evaluations on judgments formation. If we accept the well-established idea that emotions “affect the way in which information is gathered, stored, recalled, and used to make particular attributions or judgments” (Nabi, 2003: 227), it seems only natural that emotional responses may also shape the processing and dissemination of information that current theories consider central to the formation of collective reputational judgments.

In the past, these responses were largely invisible to researchers, which made it acceptable for scholars to theorize the process purely in cognitive terms – possibly by drawing on micro-economic models (Weigelt & Camerer, 1989). Social media, however, have significantly increased the amount of emotionally charged evaluations available in public domain, as well as offered insight in the emotional responses to content disseminated by news media. Under these circumstances, we argue – again – whether reputational judgments manifest in more analytical or emotional terms (or both) becomes an empirical, rather than definitional issues.

Implications for Research

The reconceptualization of media reputation that we advanced in this paper have also important consequences for how we conduct research on media reputation.

From calculating aggregate scores to tracking multiple networked narratives. Extant studies measure media reputation as an aggregate score, reflecting the average favourability in the coverage of a few prominent media outlets, such as *The Financial Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, or, more recently, also elite blogs (Zayalova et al., 2012). They do so under the assumption that these outlets are representative of the overall evaluation offered by the media, and that their authoritativeness and reach of will ensure their influence on collective judgments. As social media become increasingly relevant for the dissemination of information in the public domain, however, exploring alternative methods may be crucial to capture the more complex dynamics that we described in this paper.

First, exclusive focus on few, high-status news media may offer an increasingly partial and incomplete representation of how organizations are portrayed in public domains, and obscure the potential plurality of views expressed in multiple interaction arenas. This issue may become more pressing to the extent that large parts of society increasingly access information from sources alternative to the traditional news media (Pew Research, 2014) and their evaluative judgments reflect also – often exclusively – this information.

It could be objected that to the extent that a particular content reaches an unusually vast and rapid diffusion on social media, it will eventually be picked up by traditional news media. Once the corresponding articles are processed numerically and become but few of the observations that contribute to the measurement of an aggregate media coverage, however, precious information will be lost by weighing equally news that point to massive support or discontent among online audiences and other news about corporate events, the coverage of which is assumed to influence reputational judgments but may as well remain unnoticed by the general public. While the aggregation of content may still be acceptable – perhaps inevitable – in large scale studies that explore correlations between these average scores and other quantitative variables, this restrictive conceptualization of media reputation may

prevent more in-depth, fine-grained, case-based analyses of how reputational dynamics playing out in the media really influence the formation, contestation, and modification of reputational judgments.

Second, expressing media reputation as an aggregate score may fail to capture the more nuanced exchanges that organizational audiences can be exposed to. As even the content of news media is now made available online, it may become part of co-produced networked narratives, as it is forwarded, commented on, or hyperlinked to. Restricting the analysis of media reputation to original articles, therefore, may miss part of the content that viewers are exposed to as they access these articles, as well as evidence of the extent to which audiences accept or challenge the evaluations news media offer.

In the past, scholars were unable to gauge the response of organizational audiences to media coverage. Social media now enable to build approximate measures of the attention that a piece of news receives (for instance, by tracking the number of times it was shared) or the relative acceptance or contestation of the evaluations it implies (by content analysing posts and forums). Indirect measures of approval or disapproval (likes, re-tweets, etc.) may also give indication about the extent to which the most vocal responses reflect the views of broader audiences.

Finally, future studies may explore the use of qualitative methods to examine in more depth how multiple actors advance, dispute or negotiate evaluative judgments about an organization or its products on social media. Consumer researchers, for instance, have developed an online observational method called netnography (Kozinets, 2010) to track how consumers construct meanings through symbols and language, as they publicly discuss organizations and jointly evaluate their products and services in online interaction arenas. By aiming to offer a “realistic comprehension of online communication” (Kozinets, 2010: 34) and paying attention to the cultural context within which exchanges occur, netnography may

help reputation scholars account for the more nuanced particular use of humour, slang, and multimodality that frequently characterizes content diffused on social media as opposed to more sober, information-focused content of news media.

From yearly averages to temporal dynamics. Past studies generally measured media reputation as yearly averages. In the changing reputational landscape, this methodological choice may fail to capture the increased dynamism that social media have introduced in the production and dissemination of public information about organizations.

First, this methodological choice may obscure the peculiar temporal patterns that characterise the diffusion of evaluations in social media. On the one hand, as we discussed previously, social media enable the rapid and unpredictable diffusion of evaluations on a global scale (Castells, 2011). While yearly tracking of average coverage may capture the general stance of the media under normal circumstances, it prevents us from monitoring more closely the changing amount of attention a particular organization receives within or across reputational arenas, as well as the changing valence of evaluations. Yearly averages are also unable to examine whether and how representations abruptly change, or contradict one another, and with what effect. In fact, even daily tracking on news media coverage may not be sufficient to capture the intense interaction between multiple actors that characterizes the development of reputational incidents on social media.

On the other hand, information exchanges on the internet tend to remain available and easily retrievable for a long time after their initial diffusion, and they may therefore have a long lasting influence on the reputation of an organization. Rumours and hoaxes re-surface periodically even years after their initial creation (Veil et al., 2012). While the production of content in a given period of time may attest to the level of attention an organization is

receiving, it may capture only in part representations available in a public domain⁵. Exploring reputational dynamics on social media, instead, requires methodologies that are sensitive to both the flow of information made public in a given period of time and the cumulated stock of information resulting from previous posts and exchanges.

In order to account for this dynamism, future research on media reputation may combine traditional methods to analyze news media, with methods that can track more precisely the content and diffusion of evaluations within and across different forms of media and reputational arenas. While the inclusion of elite blogs in measures of organizational reputation (Zavyalova et al., 2012) begins to offer a more accurate portrayal of public evaluations of organizations, capturing the often dispersed and unpredictable creation and fast diffusion of evaluations across social media requires more time-sensitive measurements that account for possible previously unknown sources.

For instance, increasingly sophisticated techniques for automated sentiment analysis (Cambria et al., 2013) and social network analysis (Aggarwal, 2011), may help researchers track the content and diffusion of evaluations in social media, to examine how interactions unfold within interaction arenas (or create them in the first place) or how they shape the content of evaluations as they diffuse. Combined with survey-based measures of actual perceptions in the general public, these efforts could also begin to tease out the differential impact of different actors on organizational reputation.

Exploring the emotional component of reputational judgments. Finally, acknowledging that emotions in expressed evaluations play a role for the formation of media reputation and collective judgments encourages us to move beyond a coefficient based on a generic assessment of positive, negative, and neutral tone, and to apply methods that account for the

⁵ Years ago, for instance, one of us was deterred from purchasing tickets from Continental Airlines after an internet search led him to the www.donotflycontinentalairlines.com. This site, set up by disgruntled customers, no longer reflected the improved quality of service of the company, but still featured prominently in the results of the most common browsers.

expression of a more nuanced range of emotions. Evaluations, for instance, could be content analysed for the emotional tone and the level of arousal that they imply (e.g., Reeves et al., 1985), and this more fine-grained assessment used to examine how informational content about organizations is influenced impacts judgment formation.

Finally, extant studies have generally limited their analysis to written texts (Deephouse, 2000; Deephouse & Carter, 2005), thereby side-lining the increased use of multimodal media formats, such as videos, images, and creative mash-ups, to construct meaning and stimulate emotional responses. While popular on social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), these formats also feature to varying degrees in traditional news media. Future research may therefore explore methods that can capture multimodality (for overviews of multi-modal methods see Margolis & Pauwles, 2011; Meyer et al., 2013).

Recognizing that images, videos, and other visual artifacts are not just add-ons to verbal texts, but become an elementary mode for the construction, maintenance, and transformation of meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Raab, 2008), for instance, may encourage future research to analyze the differential impact of subverted images and informational content on collective reputational judgments, examine in more detail whether and how user-generated content poses a reputational threat, or vice-versa how organizations can leverage multi-modal communication to influence collective judgments.

Implications for Practice

Understanding media reputation as co-produced in multiple, partly interconnected interaction arenas may sensitize managers to the importance of understanding and controlling, or at least monitoring the various venues within which evaluations are produced, distributed and consumed. Tactics that enabled organizations to control traditional reputational arenas may be less appropriate to engage with online communities to influence collective interaction and

avoid the uncontrolled diffusion and consolidation of unfavourable networked narratives (see for an example Castello et al., 2016).

Success in new arenas, for instance, requires organizations to relinquish intimidation and traditional public relations, and embrace the same creative style of expression favoured by their audience, offer venues to facilitate interaction among supportive audiences, and nurture the diffusion of content that resonates with local frames rather than imposing preferred corporate messages. Following the unfortunate experience described earlier, for instance, McDonalds has built direct access to 71.5 million consumers, who have chosen to “like” and “follow” the organizations on its Facebook page and represent a receptive audience that can be reached out to and mobilized horizontally – rather than in a hierarchical top-down process – to stimulate the co-production of favourable content to boost the reputation of the company.

We suspect, however, that when it comes to understanding and managing social media, while still struggling with the affordances of these new technologies (Albu & Etter, 2016), practice may be far ahead than academia. Management scholars have just started to investigate how web-technologies affect the formation of reputation (e.g. Orlikowski & Scott, 2014; Barros, 2014) and how organizations address potential reputational threats on social media (e.g., Wang et al., 2015; Ki & Nekmat, 2014). We hope that the ideas we have presented in this paper will encourage scholars to intensifying the investigation of reputational dynamics in these new interaction arenas, and offer them useful conceptual tools to do so.

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Table 1.
How social media challenge current assumptions about media reputation

Current assumptions about media reputation	How the rise of social media challenges these assumptions
<p><i>Vertical top-down dissemination:</i> News media disseminate evaluations through one-way communication (<i>broadcasting</i>). Audiences are presumed to passively process the information they receive, and have limited opportunities to voice their responses and to interact with one another. Distinction between sources and audience is structural.</p>	<p><i>Horizontal networked dissemination:</i> Social media allow evaluations to be produced and disseminated by any member of a social network. Audiences actively produce, disseminate, combine, dispute, enrich and elaborate evaluations (<i>co-production</i>). Distinction between source and audience is situational.</p>
<p><i>Relative homogeneity of sources and content:</i> Institutionalized professional norms, and structural and procedural isomorphism shape news production, leading to relatively homogenous content of news media.</p>	<p><i>Heterogeneity of sources and content:</i> Social media users are a multitude of actors, whose motivations, sources of information, and constraints are comparatively more diverse. Co-existence of multiple evaluations in the public domain.</p>
<p><i>Credibility of evaluations depends on status of the source:</i> News media and journalists are perceived as having superior ability to evaluate organizations; high status outlet influence the content of lower status ones.</p>	<p><i>Expertise, independence and/or homophily compensate absence of low status:</i> First-hand experience, independence from corporate interests, and shared traits or affiliation confer credibility to evaluations diffused on social media, even by non-professional sources.</p>
<p><i>Reach of evaluations determined by structural position of source:</i> The potential audience reached by evaluations depends on established distribution channels of a source.</p>	<p><i>Reach of evaluations influenced also by content:</i> Depending on its content and style, content may reach a vast audience through sharing and forwarding, even if the structural position of the original source is weak.</p>
<p><i>Reluctance of news media to offer negative coverage:</i> Fear of lawsuits or losing privileged access to information or advertising revenues reduces the likelihood that organizations diffuse evaluations that may diverge from the official corporate communication.</p>	<p><i>Higher independence of sources from organizations:</i> Most social media users have little concern for lawsuits, which tend to backfire, or fear of losing privileged social or economic relationships for disseminative negative evaluations.</p>
<p><i>Emphasis on facticity:</i> Professional norms encourage news media to report news in a detached way, accurately check facts and offer multiple perspectives (journalism as a genre). Perception of facticity increases impact of evaluations.</p>	<p><i>Lower concerns for balance and accuracy:</i> Social media users are more likely to disseminate evaluations reflecting partial views and inaccurate facts. Inaccuracy and bias do not necessarily prevent the diffusion of content.</p>

Refraction of organizational images. News media base their coverage to a large degree on information received or disseminated by organizations themselves through public relations, corporate communication, etc.

Emphasis on informational content. Focus on the informational content of media coverage, under the assumption that reputation rests on analytical comparative judgments.

Homogenous audience: News media audiences understood as a monolithic entity (the “public”) exposed to converging evaluations of a core set of news media, or as homogenous stakeholder groups that use the same sources.

Subversion of organizational images. On social media, users frequently express their emotional response or creative self through the humorous alteration of images projected by organizations (logos, slogans, ads, etc.) to highlight contradictions between claims and actions.

Emphasis on emotional content. Content diffused on social media is often emotionally charged. Emotional responses increase the likelihood that this content is diffused and influences judgments.

Fragmented audiences: Combined with heterogeneity of source and content, selective exposure to preferential sources based on frame resonance create multiple loci of intense interaction characterized by insulation from alternative evaluations (echo chambers).

Figure 1. Current assumptions about media reputation and how it influences collective judgments

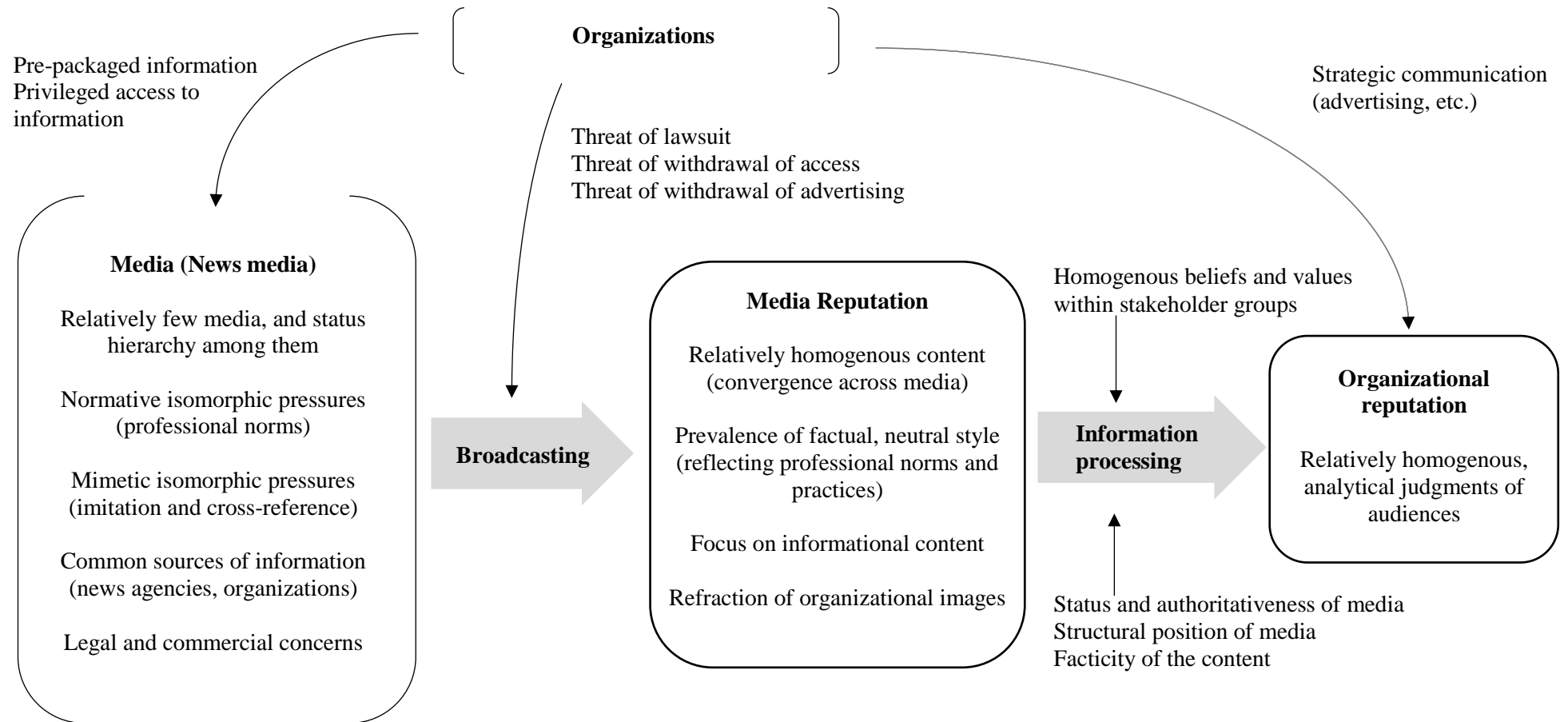


Figure 2. The formation of reputation in a new media landscape

